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ABSTRACT

Modern black poetry has emerged as an art form whose viewpoint (theme), style (structure), and language (diction and usage) focus on a particular kind of sensibility and consciousness in conflict with the world in which the poetry moves. The black aesthetic addresses the consciousness of blackness and deplores traditional poetic niceties in favor of "poems that kill"--those whose themes are provocative, critical, and militant. The ugliness, despair, and anonymity that characterize the black experience in America surface in the works of many poets. The turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s demanded a turbulent poetic structure. Some poets imitated the street vernacular; others employed creative typography as a structural device. However, the key ingredient in the black poetic stance is language. The black arts poet attempts to elicit a vocabulary of response and feeling that is both painful and disgusting in language as begrimed and degraded as the life and issues the language depicts. An essentially urban expression, black poetry of this period made frequent use of signification or "playing the dozens." Humor is often used, along with insults and obscenities. But there is also linguistic elegance, such as virtuoso free-rhyming, hyperbolic and cryptic imagery, lazy rhythmic effects, and so on. (NKA)

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THEMES, STYLE AND LANGUAGE PATTERNS OF SELECTED MODERN BLACK POETS

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THEMES, STYLE AND LANGUAGE PATTERNS

OF SELECTED MODERN BLACK POETS

As Black literature become increasingly recognized as legitimate and viable literary art, attention is being focused more precisely on the elements that form its construction and its content. Literary prose usually presents little assimilative difficulty for the astute reader. Poetry, however, must usually be read slowly, carefully, and attentively if its imaginative statements are to be understood and appreciated. This is especially pertinent to Black poetry since its themes, styles, and language patterns may deviate from traditional treatments. Many of the major modern Black poets elect to utilize themes, styles and language that reflect Black attitudes toward racism, social injustice, and the need for the emergence of Black self-determination and positive change. In short, modern Black poetry has emerged as an art form whose viewpoint (theme), style (structure), and language (diction and usage) focus on a particular kind of sensibility and consciousness in conflict with the world in which the poetry moves.

Imamu Amiri Baraka maintains that "the Black artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of American as he knows it."[1] In recent years, Black poets have

addressed the distinctive and challenging subject matter which moves beyond "protest" to the kind of realism of which Baraka demands. The new poetic form would consciously oppose the world it is forced to confront. The exactness it seeks urges the poet to a vision of America as brutal and unflinching as the history of Black Americans. The art form itself and its content has been widely proclaimed as the "Black aesthetic." Redmond defines the Black aesthetic as "the relationship of writer to reader, Black versus white audiences, and the part politics should pay in their life and work."[2] This aesthetic is one which addresses the consciousness of Blackness and deplores the traditional poetic niceties of a Yeats, for example, whose lyrical ballads extol emotional or reflective soliloquies. The "Black aesthetic" infuses an emotional an dimension that defeats the aerial vision of romantic beauty and tranquility. In Baraka's poem "Black Art" he writes:

> Poems are bullshit unless they are
> teeth on trees or lemons piled on
> a step. . . We want live words of
> the hip would live flesh coursing
> blood. . . We want poems like fists
> beating niggers out of jocks

or dagger poems in the slimy bellies

of the owner-jews. . . We want
"poems that kill." 3

The "poems that kill" are those whose themes are provocative, critical, and militant. These poems indict white America for its historic guilt while tearing away the veils from the eyes of Black America. Mari Evans' poem "Speak the Truth to the People," Conrad Kent Rivers' "In Defense of Black Poets," and Nikki Giovanni's "Reflections on April 4, 1968," each poetically establishes the ugliness, despair and anonomity that characterizes the "Black experience" in America while also extending convincing strategies for change. Evans', for example, seeks to enlighten Black people through truthfulness:

Speak the truth to the people
Talk sense to the people
Free them with reason
Free them with honesty. . .
A free mind as no need to scream
A free mind is ready for other things

To BUILD black schools
To BUILD black children
To BUILD black minds
To BUILD black love
To BUILD black impregnability
To BUILD a strong black nation
To BUILD. . . . 4

The mission of Black poetry as Rivers sees it, is to illuminate the Black oppression for generations yet to come:

> The critics cry unfair
> yet the poem is born.
> Some black emancipated baby
> will scratch his head
> wondering why you felt compelled
> to say whatever you said
>
> A black poet must bear in mind
> the misery. . . .
> Some black kid is bound to read
> you. . . .
> A black poet must remember the
> horrors. . . .
> Only the forgotten wails of a
> few black
> poets and artists
> shall survive the then of then,
> the now of now. [5]

Giovanni revives the "poems that kill" edict:

> What can I, a poor Black woman,
> do to destroy America?
> This is a question, with appropriate
> variations, being asked in every
> Black heart. There is one answer -
> I can kill. There is one compromise -
> I can protect those who kill. There
> is one cop-out - I can encourage others
> to kill. There are no other ways. [6]

During the 1960's and early 1970's Black poets felt compelled to bring to their creations all of the venom and pent-up - bitterness that could be expressed through words. "Poems," according to Baraka, "must not only have guts and

earthiness (like Blacks), but they must also be weapons and shields against racism, police, merchants, hustlers, crooked politicians and status-climbing black bourgeois. Above all they should exalt blackness."[7] These themes, then, dominate the works of modern Black poets. Racism, violence, death, and love permeate practically every Black poetic endeavor of the period. Furthermore, in an intense effort to embed into the black consciousness a respect for and an identification with the Black arts movement, Black poets developed and used stylistic devices that defied traditional structure.

The turbulence of the 1960's required a turbulent poetic structure. Hudson states that "Black art is cited as an embodiment of the Black aesthetic and a rejection of white culture and lifestyles."[8] As such, stylistic devices of Black poets conform to the demands of the times. George Kent describes a modernist school of American poetry which "techniques involve irony, unusual conjunctions of words, e.g. 'a clear delirium', imagery, sensitivity to rhythm or music of a phrase, free verse, authoritative management of tone and wide-ranging lyricism.'[9] Such poets as Madhubuti (Don Lee) "use these devices as well as those of everyday conversation, signif-

ication and musical rhythms"[10] to distinguish the "Blackness" of their poetry. "Sonia Sanchez, closely identified with the new poetry and the new consciousness, alternates between terse, explicit verse and sprawling, prosaic meanderings."[11] Sanchez also uses "constricting words and structures" in an effort to simulate street venacular. For example, in "To Blk/record/buyers" she writes:

> don't play me no
> righteous bros.
> white people
> ain't rt bout nothing
> no mo.
> don't tell me bout
> foreign dudes
> cuz no blk/
> people are grooving on a
> Sunday afternoon. [12]

Several poets, particularly Madhubuti, effectively utilize typography as a structural device. This unique structure involves the "(moving) of parallel columns vertically or horizonally on the pages."[13] One example is Madhubuti's poem "Don't Cry, Scream":

> into the sixties
> a trane
> came/out of the
> fifties with a
> golden boxcar
> riding the rails
> of novation.
> blowing
> a - melodies

screeching,
screaming,
blasting -
driving some away,
(those paper readers
who thought
manhood was something
innate). . .

Trane done went.
(got his hat & Left me one)
now brother,
i didn't cry,
i just -
Scream-eeeeeeeeeeeeee-ed. . .
we-eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. . .
WHERE YOU DONE GONE, BROTHER?
Sing loud & high with feeling
letting yr/voice break. [14]

However, neither the rapidity of style, ballet-like precision, nor the creative typography common to Black poetry can provide the specific ingredient that resolves the conflict between the traditional poetic stance and the Black poetic stance. The key ingredient is its language.

Modern Black poets' perspective exist through a language that is as begrimed and degraded as the life and issues the language depicts. The Black Arts poet attempts to elicit a vocabulary of response and feeling that is both painful and disgusting. The final sense one has is of a recalcitrant infection oozing onto a page. Baraka is a master of this

kind of manipulative and shocking language:

> . . . Black poems to
> smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches
> whose brains are red jelly stuck
> between 'lizabeth taylor's toes. Stinking
> whores! We want "poems that kill."
> . . . Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
> and take their weapons leaving them dead
> with tongues pulled out and sent
> to Ireland. . . . [15]

The language of Black poets of the 1960's and early 1970's is essentially American and urban. In a circular manner, blues and jazz, like the street, shaped the defining rhythms of self and world appropriate to the world from which they come. The world of Black poetic expression made frequent use of signification or "playing the dozens." Henderson states that while Baraka utilized "the dozens" as a political weapon. Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, who were engaged in direct political action used this device as a means of attacking and entertaining an opponent whose background did not prepare him for dealing with the technique.[16] Excerpts from "Rap's Poem" illustrate the sophistication with which this approach is used:

> I'm the man who walked the
> water and tied the whales tale
> in a knot
> Taught the little fishes how to swim
> Crossed the burning sands and shook
> the devil's hand
> Rode around the world on the back

of a snail carrying a sack
saying AIR MAIL. . . .
Yes, I'm hemp the demp the women's pimp
Women fight for my delight. . . .

Now, if the brother couldn't come
back behind that, I usually cut
him some slack (depending on time.
place, and attitude). We learned
what the white folks call verbal
skills. We learned how to throw
them words together. [17]

Not all Black poets throw their words together in such a way as to invoke humor. Many modern Black poets intend to startle through the blatant use of obscenities and insults. Giovanni is a prime example of one poet who employs shock-producing language to get across a very serious idea:

Dykes of the world are united
Faggots got their thing together
(Everyone is organized)
Black people these are facts
Where's your power. . . .
Honkies rules the world
The most vital commodity in America
Is Black people
Ask any uncircumcized honkie. . . . [18]

In another poem, Giovanni writes:

Nigger
can you kill
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie
Can a nigger kill the Man. . .
Can you stab-a-Jew. . .

Can you run a protestant down with your
'68 Eldorado. . .
Can you piss on a blond head. . . . [19]

The poems above and others like them depend for their force upon the reader's sensibility being so battered that he becomes outraged at the painful descriptions contained in its verse. Also, Black poets relied upon Black people being able to "relate" to a language form uniquely their own.

The language form of modern Black poetry contains the hip words, phrases and profanities of the street, but it also contains what Henderson delineates as forms of "Black linguistic elegance." He considers the most obvious forms to be: (1) virtuoso naming and enumerating; (2) lazy rhythmic effects; (3) virtuoso free-rhyming; (4) hyperbolic imagery; (5) metaphysical imagery; (6) understatement; (7) compressed and cryptic imagery; and, (8) worrying the line.[20] Each form is peculiarly Black in terms of folk expression, rhythms, wordplay, wisecracks, and "rappin'." Robert Creeley asserts that "the usual critical vocabulary will not be of much use in trying to locate the character of writing we have now come to."[21] Many readers of modern Black poetry would agree with this statement for the simple reason that many non-Black Americans such as Creeley may feel

threatened by the nuances and dimensions of Black language patterns.

The themes, style and language patterns of modern Black poets are contrived to attract attention to the social, economic, and political oppression of Black people. Even more significant, modern Black poets have tried to increase, through their poetic content and structure, a sensitivity on the part of Blacks for their developmental potential. The veracity of modern Black poetic vision depends upon its readers' sensibilities becoming so aroused that conflict will occur and change will be an inevitable result.

Grace, style, precision, freedom and elan are all consciously interwoven into modern Black Petry so that a recognition of its value and an appreciation of its purpose can be achieved.

Endnotes

[1]LeRoi Jones, Home: Social Essays (London, 1968), p. 13.

[2]Eugene B. Redmond, Drumvoices (Garden City, New York: Anhor Press/Doubleday, 1976), p. 394.

[3]Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), "Black Art", Stephen Henderson, Understanding Black Poetry (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1973), p. 213.

[4]Mari Evans, "Speak the Truth to the People", Henderson, Under.Blk. Poetry, p. 253-54.

[5]Conrad Kent Rivers, "In Defense of Black Poets", Henderson, Under. Blk. Poetry, p. 279.

[6]Nikki Giovanni, "Reflections on April 4, 1968", Henderson, Under. Blk Poetry, p. 279.

[7]Redmond, Drumvoices, p. 356.

[8]Theodore R. Hudson, Lecture on Black Poetry, English 249: Literature of the American Negro, II, Howard University, 7 March 1984.

[9]Hudson, "Lecture".

[10]Hudson, "Lecture".

[11]Redmond, Drumvoices, p. 364.

[12]Sonia Sanchez, "To Blk/Record/Buyers," Henderson, Under. Blk. Poetry, p. 272.

[13] Redmond, Drumvoices, p. 390.

[14] Don Lee, "Don't Cry, Scream," Henderson, Under Blk. Poetry, p. 336.

[15] Baraka, "Black Art", Henderson, Under. Blk Poetry, p. 213.

[16] Stephen Henderson, Under. Blk. Poetry, p. 43.

[17] H. "Rap" Brown, "Rap's Poem," Henderson, Under. Blk. Poetry, p. 187-88.

[18] Nikki Giovanni, "Of Liberation," Redmond, Drumvoices, p. 362.

[19] Giovanni, "True Import of the Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro", Drumvoices, p. 362-63.

[20] Henderson, Under Blk. Poetry. p. 33-42.

[21] Donald Allen and Robert Creeley (eds.), The New Writing in the U.S.A. (Hammondsworth, 1967), p. 19.